

# Forging Marine Special Operators

By MASTIN M. ROBESON



**E**stablished on February 24, 2006, and headquartered at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) is the Marine Corps component of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). MARSOC is making great advances in its quest to build and operate in order to contribute directly to the Nation's overseas contingency operations. Now at about 80 percent of its full mission capability, MARSOC is in the process of reorganizing and right-sizing to continue to meet its current operational commitments and posturing the force for its future roles.

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MajGen Robeson addresses graduates of first MARSOC Individual Training Course

U.S. Marine Corps (Richard Blumenstein)

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Since our activation almost 4 years ago, MARSOC's pace of operations has increased steadily. As an additional capability is introduced or capacity increased, it is employed against a global threat. MARSOC provides to USSOCOM the following additive and complementary capabilities:

- company- and team-sized units with the capability to conduct distributed operations
- littoral and counterinsurgency expertise
- special reconnaissance
- operational command and control to field a special operations task force or a combined-joint special operations task force
- interoperable conduit between USSOCOM and the Marine Corps (for example, Marine Expeditionary Unit [Special Operations Capable] integration into USSOCOM Theater Security Cooperation Plans).

In January 2009, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates directed MARSOC to deploy two Marine special operations companies into Afghanistan. Subsequently, USSOCOM tasked us to deploy a special operations task force headquarters to Afghanistan to provide command and control over all special operations assets and missions and to coordinate

*we agree that the Phase Zero engagements in key areas of Southeast Asia and Africa are a cornerstone of our nation's long-term strategy*

their operational functions within a specified region. Both of these firsts for MARSOC are the result of our development of broad force capabilities. When we were first established under USSOCOM, we were used as an immediate solution to operational gaps. USSOCOM now has a focused vision as to how and where to best employ our capabilities, demonstrating its increased confidence in our abilities. Additionally, it gives the Marine Corps a greater understanding of what value MARSOC provides to the current fight, to the Nation, and to Corps history.

Our expanded footprint in Afghanistan and an increase in the number of joint-combined exchange training and counternarcotics

training commitments are also indicative of the steady increase in our operational demand as our capabilities grow. This has facilitated our ability to take on more of the load historically shouldered by other special operations forces (SOF) units. During fiscal year 2006, we conducted 4 missions; in fiscal year 2007, we completed 15 missions; in fiscal year 2008, we completed 32 missions; and we completed

top priority for us is the preparation, deployment, and redeployment of our forces to and from combat, specifically in support of Operation *Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan*. This includes developing the special operations task force and preparing for its employment as well as maintaining the two-company presence. We are also focused on building partnerships with other partner nations'



Marine Special Operations Advisor Group members train in advanced urban warfare tactics

U.S. Marine Corps (Steven King)

over 40 missions last fiscal year. We are rapidly growing in capability and capacity, providing the forces and expertise needed to contribute to global, sustained engagements by U.S. SOF.

Like our joint USSOCOM counterparts, our mission sets typically fall under the following core activities: foreign internal defense, security force assistance, counterinsurgency, special reconnaissance, and direct action. A

forces to include South Asia and the littorals of Southeast Asia and Africa. We very much agree that the Phase Zero engagements in key areas of Southeast Asia and Africa are a cornerstone of our nation's long-term strategy.

### Internal Reorganization

Due to the increased need for the employment of MARSOC forces and the accelerated maturation of our capabilities and



other force initiatives, we are in the process of reorganizing or right-sizing our structure. This is a top priority. The past year has validated the tremendous success that we can achieve when we properly task-organize our Marine special operations companies and teams.

In April 2009, we redesignated the Marine Special Operations Advisor Group as Marine Special Operations Regiment. This established a structure of 1 regiment, 3 special operations battalions, 12 special operations companies, and 48 special operations teams. Each battalion has the same mission but focuses on different geographic areas. The key to our success is the ability to grow our combat support and combat service support capabilities (signals intelligence, human intelligence, communications, intelligence analysis, explosive ordnance disposal, and military working dogs) to support the above structure and the requisite maintainers.

Once the reorganization is complete, we will have three colonel-commanded units: Marine Special Operations Regiment with three Marine Special Operations Battalions (1<sup>st</sup> MSOB at Camp Pendleton, California, and 2<sup>d</sup> and 3<sup>d</sup> MSOBs at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina), Marine Special Operations Support Group (which will include a support battalion and an intelligence battalion at Camp Lejeune), and the Marine Special Operations School.

### Building the MARSOF Marine

In our ongoing efforts to build a command with long-term relevancy that USSOCOM can employ across the spectrum of SOF engagement methods, it is crucial to select and train Marines capable of conducting missions as directed. We believe that Marines are who we are and special operations are what we do. As such, forging Marines into Marine Special Operations Forces (MARSOF) operators is another top priority.

We believe there is no better pool from which to recruit special operators than the Marine Corps. Marines have a history and background in small wars and expeditionary operations that make them comfortable working with emerging regional nations and in austere, isolated locations. At the outset, we focused solely on recruiting Marines from the combat arms community, but we have recently cast a wider net across the entire Corps for potential candidates. This includes updating some of the selection criteria and opening up availability to all military occu-

pational specialties, provided they meet the proper requirements.

One of our more significant milestones to date has been the graduation of our first Individual Training Course (ITC), which represents a major achievement in having a SOF-qualified program that takes a basically trained Marine and produces a competent special operator—the last piece to complete the MARSOF pipeline.

The process for a Marine to become a part of MARSOC begins when we recruit and screen potential candidates. These Marines then attend Assessment and Selection (A&S) that determines if they have the attributes required to complete training and

The next step for a newly assigned Marine is ITC, an intensive 7-month training package broken into four phases. The framework of the program of instruction emphasizes the indirect approach, irregular warfare, counterinsurgency, and amphibious reconnaissance. Phase One is the basic skills phase where Marines are introduced to USSOCOM and MARSOC, tactical combat casualty care (advanced medical training), basic communications, Survival Evasion Resistance Escape, weapons skills, and fire support. Phase Two is the shaping phase where Marines are taught mission planning and preparation, introduction to special reconnaissance skills, advanced combat marksmanship, amphibious

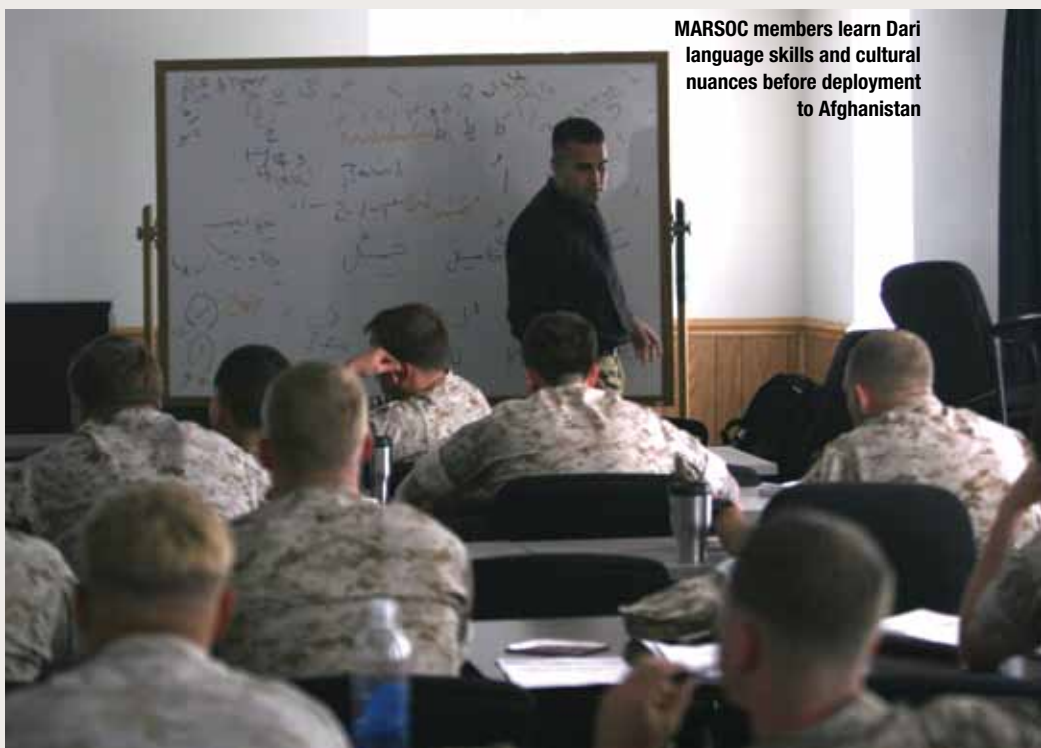
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### *the Advanced Linguistic Course is intended to prepare Marines to excel in cross-cultural relationship-building activities*

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conduct special operations missions. The assessment includes physical, team, and problemsolving events providing an overall pattern of performance designed to identify those Marines who are most comfortable working in austere and isolated areas, or in small teams, while employing an indirect approach. At the completion of A&S, Marines receive orders to MARSOC.

reconnaissance, advanced light infantry and small unit operations, and basic demolitions. Phase Three is the refining phase where Marines sharpen their skills in advanced communications, urban close quarters combat, and advanced special reconnaissance. Phase Four is the culmination phase where historical irregular warfare and counterinsurgency operations case studies are used to reinforce



**MARSOC members learn Dari language skills and cultural nuances before deployment to Afghanistan**

U.S. Marine Corps (Stephen C. Benson)

the principles they have learned and will employ during the final exercise.

After graduating, select Marines transition to the Advanced Languages Courses, which encompass 9 to 12 months of concentrated language instruction designed to provide each deploying team with a near-fluent speaker for the language in which each team will operate. This is a new program called the Advanced Linguistic Course and is intended to prepare Marines to excel in the cross-cultural relationship-building activities that are essential to working effectively with other nations. The majority of the graduates will move directly to an operational team in one of the MSOBs. The goal is to establish 48 Marine special operations teams with at least one member

### New MARSOC Facilities

We have developed and are executing a long-term military construction plan to provide MARSOC with extensive, multifaceted, and functional compounds at Camp Lejeune and Camp Pendleton. Facilities valued at \$370 million are currently under construction, and future projects totaling over \$300 million have been validated by USSOCOM to round out and support the emerging MARSOC organization.

Since our activation, we have occupied a growing inventory of geographically dispersed interim facilities on both coasts. We are currently transitioning from over 112 facilities into a newly constructed compound at Camp Lejeune's Stone Bay, and we anticipate our west coast compound at Camp Pendleton's

Center that will incorporate all aspects of physical fitness, therapy, rehabilitation, nutrition, and education specifically meant to develop and sustain the MARSOC human asset to its maximum potential in order to provide the highest level of operational readiness while preserving the force.

Our future projects include facilities on both coasts to support subordinate unit headquarters, company, and team facilities needs, as well as additional projects to support expanded mission requirements for academic instruction, training venues, billeting, and associated personnel and equipment mission support activities.

### Future of the Force

MARSOC continues to meet the challenge of concurrently *building* the force and *deploying* the force. The lessons learned from ongoing operations have enabled us to adapt our structure, training, and operational cycle to improve force capabilities and to meet requirements. We are still in the process of growing our force to its authorized structure. We are currently at 82 percent of our Marine build, 94 percent of our Navy build, and 75 percent of our civilian build. With continued terrific support from Headquarters Marine Corps, we hope to achieve our manpower goals to become fully mission capable during fiscal year 2012.

As we continue to mature our capabilities and grow our capacity, we are reminded of the many magnificent Marines who have served exceptionally in special operations throughout our Corps' history. First Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon's daring exploits against the Barbary pirates in 1805 began a special operations history that has continued through the Spanish-American War, Nicaragua, Haiti, Dominican Republic, World War II, Vietnam, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, and dozens of other small wars and engagements. As the newest member of an incredibly capable joint special operations community, we look forward to providing the Nation with capabilities that will truly contribute to irregular warfare successes globally. We Marines are proud to serve alongside our fellow special operators. We remain Marines first, who are always faithful, always forward, silent warriors. **JFQ**



U.S. Marine Corps (Stephen C. Benson)

Marine Special Operations Regiment members relay enemy target details during fire support and combined arms training

who is near fluent in the language and culture of the county that he will operate in (the remaining members receive survival language training).

After assignment to their units, Marines are sent to follow-on advanced courses offered by our Marine Special Operations School. Additional Service, joint, and SOF courses are also available to them. At the end of the pipeline, the amount of schooling the Marines potentially receive will make them a premier special operator for current and future USSOCOM missions.

Las Flores Area to be ready for occupancy in the summer of 2010. The Stone Bay compound initially opened with a new component headquarters and operations/intelligence building, and will be followed by facilities to support bachelor enlisted housing, health services, equipment operations/maintenance, supply and weapons storage, academic training, both entry level and advance academic instruction, special operations training range, and fitness requirements.

We are also establishing a state-of-the-art Warfighter Rehabilitation Performance